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Seeing the Invisible: Batman's Gotham and Green Arrow's Star City Unmasked

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Abstract: "[...] individuality in the modern city becomes a staged production of superficial effects" (Suhr 240-241). This performative aspect that André Suhr describes when he talks about the individual's role in the city is predominantly emphasised in superhero comics, in which the hero is dressing up in order to take on the persona of 'hero' and or 'vigilante.' In this regard, two examples protrude, namely The Batman and The Green Arrow. For both the city is transformed into a stage on which they can perform their heroism. However, in doing so, they are at the risk of losing their identity as Bruce Wayne and Oliver Queen, respectively. In the article, I explore the creation and loss of identity within the city space by means of the Green Arrow comics by Mike Grell as well as the TV show Arrow and Batman: Broken City by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso. In these texts, the struggle of wearing different masks is shown in the characters' identity formation but also the city since the latter, like its heroes, is torn between anarchy and law, between despair and hope.

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SEEING THE INVISIBLE: BATMAN'S GOTHAM AND GREEN ARROW'S STAR CITY UNMASKED

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Cities in comics are often represented as confining and liberating at the same time. They promise opportunity and prospect embodying the American Dream which, nonetheless, comes at a cost. The downsides can be diverse: the loss of family and friends due to crimes, an overwhelming anonymity, or the loss the self. André Suhr sums this aspect of the city up by outlining that

On the one hand it liberates the individual to concentrate on him- or herself [...]; on the other hand this very liberation may produce loneliness and isolation. In an atmosphere of general indifference it gets harder and harder to be recognized as an individual. So, according to Simmel, individuality in the modern city becomes a staged production of superficial effects. (Suhr 2010, 240-241)

This performative aspect of the urban setting is predominantly emphasized in superhero comics, in which the hero is dressing up in order to take on the persona of "hero" and/or "vigilante." In this regard, two examples stand out, namely the eponymous protagonists of the comic series *The Batman* and *The Green Arrow*. For both, the city is transformed into a stage on which they can perform their heroism. However, in doing so, they are at the risk of losing their unmasked identity respectively as Bruce Wayne and Oliver Queen. In the following article, I would like to explore the creation and loss of identity within the city space through the analysis of the comic miniseries *Batman: Broken City* (2004) by writer Brian Azzarello and artist Eduardo Risso, and Mike Grell's comic series *Green Arrow* (issues 1-12) from 1987–1989 (later republished



as collected editions in 2012-2013)¹, as well as the TV show *Arrow* seasons 1-5². In these texts, the struggle of wearing different masks is shown in the characters' identity formation but also the city, since the latter, like its heroes, is torn between anarchy and law, between despair and hope.

I would like to begin by analyzing a collection of different openings of the TV show *Arrow* in order to highlight the pivotal theme the show is revolving around. These openings are framed by the voice of the protagonist Oliver Queen, who retells his backstory and motivation for becoming the Green Arrow. He was shipwrecked and had to survive in the wilderness of an island, which was not quite as isolated as he thought. Indeed, throughout the series, flashbacks to Oliver's life on the island show people he meets on the island and different criminal organizations working there. In this remote setting, he not only learns to survive but he is taught to fight in order to eventually clean his home, Star City (or Starling City, as it is first called in the TV show), of corruption and crime, as his father had wished for before he committed suicide in front of Oliver:

My name is Oliver Queen. For five years I was stranded on an island with only one goal [...]: survive. Now I will fulfill my father's dying wish [...] to use a list of names he left me, to bring down those who are poisoning my city. To do this, I must become someone else. I must become something else. (Season 1)

My name is Oliver Queen. After five years on a hellish island, I have come home with only one goal: to save my city. But to do so, I can't be the killer I once was. To honor my friend's memory, I must be someone else. I must be something else. (Season 2)

My name is Oliver Queen. After five years in hell, I have come home with only one goal: to save my city. Now others have joined my crusade. To them, I am Oliver Queen. But to the rest of Starling City, I am someone else. I am something else. (Season 3)

My name is Oliver Queen. After five years in hell, I returned home with only one goal: to save my city. But my old approach wasn't enough. I had to become someone else. I had to become something else. I had to become the Green Arrow. (Season 4)

My name is Oliver Queen. After five years in hell, I returned home with only one goal: to save my city. Today I fight this war on two fronts. By day, I lead Star City as

¹ The 2013 and 2014 reprints of the collected editions of volumes 1 and 2, which include issues 1-12, which were originally copyrighted in 1988, are used here.

² While there are eight seasons of *Arrow*, only season 1-5 will be focused on since in season 6, Oliver Queen's identity is revealed, which is why a comparison with the Batman with regard to hidden identities is more applicable for seasons 1-5.



a mayor. By night, I'm someone else. I am something else. I am the Green Arrow.
(Season 5)

Two fundamental elements are highlighted throughout the progression of these openings. The first emphasis is put on the process of creation of identity and, consequently, the dichotomy between Oliver Queen and the Green Arrow. The same can be observed in the character of Batman, in which we find two sides of one person, namely Bruce Wayne and his created identity of Batman. The second aspect focuses on the city and more precisely on the need for a hero to protect the citizens of their home by taking out corrupt and criminal individuals. Thus, both the Green Arrow and Batman's motivation for their risky adventures is to save their cities, Star City and Gotham, respectively. In the TV show *Arrow* this is pointed out in the beginning of every episode and is substantiated through the episode's story arc. In fact, in each episode Oliver Queen assures the viewer that the city is poisoned, that it needs a savior and that he needs to change in order to take on the role himself. Over the course of the five seasons discussed here, the trigger for his motivation changes. While in season 1 he kills people who have failed the city like a soldier who is fulfilling superior orders—such as Ted Gaynor, leader of the Blackhawk Squad Protection Group, who abuses his power for armed car-robberies, in season 2, it is revenge—or rather avenging his childhood friend, who was killed in an artificial earthquake caused by his adversary—which drives him. In season 3, Queen seems to see himself as a crusader, which also implies that he wants to conquer the city, to take it back from the corrupt influences it has been suffering.

The hardship lived by the city's population is mirrored in the pain Oliver experienced on the island and the trauma he has to deal with when he comes back. The comics by Mike Grell, instead, emphasize the crime fighting aspect of the Green Arrow by portraying him almost as a detective who works together with the police and who tries to avoid violence if possible. Even though, especially in the TV show, the Green Arrow is constantly influenced and haunted by his past, he does not seem as traumatized by it as Batman is. The Batman in Azzarello and Risso's comic series, seems to use violence to work through his own traumatic past and thus more often than not seems to be consumed by the violence of the city, i.e. he is using the same methods as the criminals he is chasing and therefore his portrayal comes across as ambiguous. He does not only blend in with the criminals but also with the corruptive city of Gotham. André Suhr outlines that the city plays an important role in superhero comics since almost "every superhero is located in a specifically outlined city, a city with which he or she shares a close although sometimes ambivalent relationship that is constitutive to his or her character" (Suhr 2010, 231).

Batman occasionally realizes the questionable character of the means he employs, and also the Green Arrow is aware of the blurred lines between being a criminal and

being a hero. In *Green Arrow: Hunter's Moon* (1987), he outlines when stating that he does not know whose side he is on, i.e. he does not know if he is a good or a bad guy (Issue 4). Both Batman and Green Arrow have to constantly reinvent themselves to fit their heroic role as in a form of repetition compulsion—as it is suggested in the openings of the *Arrow* TV show. Moreover, on a meta-level, they are further reinvented as characters due to the serial production of the comics, which allows the invention of new and changing story lines. The characters' reinvention is, then, mirrored in their seriality and reimagination in different comic book issues and different media. On the level of the diegesis, this re-imagination of the protagonists can be seen in their use of costumes and space. While Green Arrow dresses as a Robin Hood figure to symbolize hope for the people against overbearing powers, Batman chooses a bat-inspired black costume to provoke fear in his adversaries. Even though both characters have different motivations, their operational methods are quite similar. Both take on the role of the detective but what is more, both use the urban space to their advantage. The vertical structure of the city helps them to literally watch over the city, while the narrow streets and alleyways allow them to remain hidden—especially at night.



Figure 1 Left: *Green Arrow: Hunter's Moon*, issue 3, p. 13. Right: *Batman: Broken City*, p. 3.



The darkness of the night offers protection for them as a heterotopic space or rather an anti-space, i.e. a space that is physically real but simultaneously unreal due to its ungraspable nature. In this regard, the Green Arrow and the Batman are like the night; Batman is even called the Dark Knight, a pun which suggests his shadowy appearance and also his, at least seemingly, noble intentions. Both protagonists are presented as phantoms, which is mirrored in their aforementioned choice of clothes, which helps creating a myth around their persona. Thus, they are invisible and yet present, hidden and yet seen. They are hiding behind a mask to project an image of a vigilante that simultaneously and apparently allows them to be their true self in public. Vice versa, Oliver Queen and Bruce Wayne are also wearing a mask, a public mask, which hides their identity as the city's vigilante. It can be argued that in order to be the Batman and the Green Arrow, Bruce Wayne and Oliver Queen have to be reimagined to create a new life, a new sense of self for themselves as well as for the city they connect with. In this regard, the city plays a major role as it reflects the protagonists' mind. The city, like Oliver and Bruce, is not what it seems; it appears to be functioning but at its core, it is not. Hence, it needs to be saved just like Oliver and Bruce need saving from the city's corruption, their traumatic past, and their repetition compulsion in the form of hyper-violent acts. In the attempt of helping the city, the latter gradually consumes them, it feeds of them as they feed of the city. They cannot live without the city as the city cannot live without them. In fact, they need to save the city in order to save themselves.

In *Batman*, this becomes clear as Gotham is associated with the Batman from its very beginning. Without the Batman, it seems, Gotham would not exist, or at least it would have long been condemned to the rottenness of its criminal nature. Vice versa, the Batman would not exist without Gotham since it is Gotham itself and, more precisely, its rottenness which transformed Bruce Wayne into Batman on the night his parents were murdered (Uricchio 2010, 120). Hence, Batman is born out of a criminal act and he wants to fight the seed or rather the virus that made him a vigilante. However, he himself is infected. In his methods of fighting violence, he himself uses violence. In his attempts to bring lawbreakers to justice, he himself justifies violating the law. Through his violent methods, he thus fails not only to erase crime, but also to save himself from unlawful behavior. Every time he uses violence against others, he relives his childhood trauma of his parents' murder, which is shown in the repetitive depiction of his parents' death. Thus, the comics artistically emphasize the trauma he relives by literally repeating the same sequence multiple times. On the other hand, he can neither stop fighting the crime—as that would mean giving not only the city up but also himself—nor can he erase crime. If he freed the city of all criminals, the Batman, the world's greatest detective, would become obsolete since there would not be anything

to detect nor fight against³. This interdependency of the Batman and Gotham is thus a vicious circle, a trap. Batman cannot escape the repetition of violent acts, he cannot escape Gotham and he cannot escape himself. Therefore, like the city—which seems strong, promising, and golden on the outside but is actually dirty, dark, dangerous and altogether deathly on the inside, as it is described in *Broken City*—the Batman is “outwardly confident and uber-competent [...]” while he is “inwardly battling his fear” (Duncan 2011, 152).



Figure 2 Left: *Batman: Broken City*, p. 48. Right: *ibid.*, p.97.

A similar point can be made for seasons 1-3—and especially the first season—of *Arrow*, in which Oliver uses (often lethal) violence against his targets that are listed in a book Oliver’s father left for him to rid the city of corruption. Referring to his deeds in the earlier seasons of the show, it is pointed out in season 5 that this violence has made him a serial killer who tries to embody the law by breaking it. Oliver realizes, however, that violence cannot become extinct by means of violence. Consequently, in seasons 4 and 5, which are even more focused on the actual saving of the city, the Arrow’s goal and motivations are less personal. Oliver realizes that what the city needs is hope. For the citizens of Star City, this hope comes in the form of Damian Darhk in season 4, the leader of a terrorist organization called H.I.V.E., who promises a better and healthier city by attempting to rebuild society in artificial environment, only allowing a few selected ones into this shelter, and ridding the rest of the world from crime by destroying it. As the name already suggests, Damian thus brings darkness instead of salvation as he tries to destroy the city by means of an atomic missile. Oliver has to react to this new threat, which is similar to Malcolm Merlin’s earthquake attack in

³ Interestingly enough, this is a point the *Lego Batman Movie* makes in its premise. Here, Gotham City finally rid itself of all crime, making the figure of Batman redundant.

season 2 but on a larger scale as Darhk does not only try to destroy certain districts of Star City, but his goal is to cleanse the entire city and eventually, the entire world population. It is not enough to attack or lock up criminals anymore—after all, the attacks against Darhk and his army continuously fail. It does not suffice any longer to be a vigilante in the city. In fact, the Arrow's violence seems to irritate people and that is why Oliver has to reimagine his alter ego; he has to reinvent himself to protect and rescue the city, which is why he transforms into the 'Green' Arrow. This involves also engagement during the day as Oliver Queen. Oliver understands that it is easy to light a beacon of hope at night; it is not so easy, though, to be a silver lining during daytime—it is simply harder to be seen. This is the reason why Oliver decides to be heard instead as Oliver Queen. He fights Darhk with words instead of violence as billionaire and entrepreneur Oliver Queen and he raises his voice for the people of the city as Oliver Queen (even though in the end he has to kill him as the Green Arrow).



Figure 3 *Arrow*, season 4, episode 23.

In season 5, he finally becomes mayor of Star City. Thus, he not only leads the city, he *incorporates* the city, he becomes the city both by day and by night. By day, he is the face of the city, openly fighting for the people by means of rhetoric. At night, he blends in with the urban space, he becomes one with the buildings, the alleyways, and the shadows that creep around the corners. Moreover, he fights physically. He becomes

both the pen and the sword and yet he cannot be both at the same time, which is outlined by his girlfriend Felicity Smoak in season 4, episode 23 when she states, “I’m saying that there is a man who killed Darhk in cold blood. And that same man stood on top of a car and gave the city its hope back. What you’re feeling isn’t darkness, it’s a schism. You’re at war with two sides of yourself.” Hence, like the Batman, Oliver is caught between the public role as a mayor and his private alter ego Green Arrow, as well as between his public appearance as Green Arrow and the private person Oliver Queen.

This ties in with the imagination of the postmodern city. As scholar Stefan L. Brandt explains, “[t]he individuals in postmodern urban fiction seem literally invaded by the noise of the city (and of postmodern consume culture, in general). Overwhelmed by these never-fading impulses, the characters position themselves in the intermediate zone between privacy and public life, often in a carefully staged sanctuary of silence and respite” (Brandt 2009, 556). This dichotomy between the private and the public sphere can also be observed in the TV show *Arrow* as well as in the *Batman* comics by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso. Oliver and Bruce withdraw into their created selves of the vigilante. Their costumes become their staged sanctuary. The stage is the city itself.



Figure 4 *Batman: Broken City*, p. 87.

From this perspective, the roles as the Batman and the Green Arrow, are exactly that: a role that is played, something imagined, a creation, a performance. However, what is it that remains hidden and invisible, i.e. what is behind the mask? Who is behind the mask? Aleta-Amirée von Holzen explores this concept of masking identities of



superheroes and comes to the conclusion that has been confirmed by DC Comics executive editor Dan DiDio that “Bruce Wayne is the mask” (DiDio qutd. in Langley 2012, 64), i.e. that the mask does not hide the hero’s real identity but expose it (von Holzen 2019, 382). Therefore, the hero *is* the real identity, which explains why neither Oliver Queen nor Bruce Wayne feel comfortable in their public roles as influential billionaires. Only when they vanish behind their created façade of a dark knight and a Robin Hood character, they feel at home, they feel true and authentic, they feel real. Thus, the public self becomes a metaphorical mask for them. In this respect, it can be said that the city as it is presented to the outside world with its golden skyline and sparkling lights at night, is only an image like the public roles Bruce and Oliver fulfil to hide what’s invisible, namely their true unmasked (even though masked) selves as shadows of the night, as cornerstones of the city.

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